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Functions and Issues of Block Language in English Newspapers

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Abstract

The current writer examined the functions and issues of block language (special vocabulary items and grammar) in three online newspapers published in English, namely, the Indonesian *The Jakarta Post* (JP), the American *The Washington Post* (WP) and the British *The Telegraph* (TT). Sample uses of block language, such headlines as *Obama to visit RI* (JP), *Blaze hits Jersey Shore boardwalk* (WP) and *The UK jobs market: seven key charts* (TT), were collected from the three newspapers and were analyzed to explore the functions and issues of this special language. To discuss the collected data, the current writer referred to ideas on block language and headline writing proposed by various authors. It is expected that the discussion results would be beneficial to readers, including learners of the English language, to understand better the functions and issues (complexities) of block language, for instance, *back* meaning *support*, *bid* meaning *attempt*, and *blast* meaning *explosion* and *criticize severely*.

Keywords: *block language, headline, newspaper*

Introduction

Since block language, which has its own special vocabulary items and grammatical system, is challenging for learners of English to understand, it is beneficial for us to examine the uses and issues related to the special language. Some or even many learners of the English language find it hard to understand news, especially headlines, used by newspapers in English, such as *The Jakarta Post*, *The Washington Post* (published in the United States of America) and *The Telegraph* (published in Great Britain). As widely recognized, electronic and printed media use block language considering that it has short, dramatic vocabulary items (*blaze* and *envoy*) and 'deviant' grammatical structure (*Five killed in clash* = *Five people have been killed in the clash*), for example.

Data or sample uses of block language for this study would be collected from the three online newspapers *The Jakarta Post*, *The Washington Post* and *The Telegraph* and were analyzed to investigate the functions and issues of the special language used by the mass media. To examine the collected data – sample uses, the present author writer referred to concepts, theoretical principles and findings on headline writing styles and on block language in headlines proposed by a number of authors, including grammarians, such as Swan (2002) and Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985). The current author expects that the study results would benefit learners of the English language in order to understand better the functions and issues and be more able to tackle challenges related to block language found in English newspapers. The focus of the present study is in line with the opinion of Timuçin (2010), who states that "the language of newspapers has attracted the attention of many scholars whose interests lie in language and its varieties".

Previous Studies

Let us first raise a simple question: Where do we find block language in our daily lives? Here comes the answer: "Block language", as Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985: 845) point out, "appears in such functions as labels, titles, newspaper headlines, headings, notices, and advertisements". Next, we might want to ask where we often find the uses of block language.

Quirk *et al.* (1985: 845-846) say that "simple block language messages are most often nonsentences, consisting of a noun or noun phrase or nominal clause in isolation". Interestingly, in block language, "no verb is needed, because all else necessary to the understanding of the message is furnished by the context" (Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 846). To Keeble (2001: 85), block language vocabulary items are "cliches of journalism or journelese, such as *probe*, *axe*, *boost*, *jibe*, *shock* and *blast*."

Regarding headlines, Swan (2002: 259) says they employ special language and defines them as "the short titles above newspaper reports (e.g. RUSSIAN WOMAN LANDS ON MOON)". Once, the current writer asked his conference audience whether or not they knew the meaning of the word *blaze*, as in a (possible) headline *Blaze in Bogota*. It turned out nearly all of them said that they did not know *blaze* is a synonym of *big fire*. Note that *blaze* is an example of a block language vocabulary item. Although *blaze* is longer than *fire*, it is preferable in the context because it sounds more dramatic than *fire*. In the word *blaze*, we as if could hear the sounds of a burning fire. The difficulty faced the audience above is understandable because "The headlines in English-language newspapers can be very difficult to understand. One reason for this is that newspaper headlines are often written in a special style, which is very different from ordinary English", as Swan (2002) concludes. What is a headline? Reah (2002: 13) says that a headline "is a unique type of text. It has a range of functions that specifically dictate its shape, content and structure, and it operates within a range of restrictions that limit the freedom of the writer".

Interestingly, we can also observe that "newspaper headlines commonly contain block language because of pressure on space" (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik, 1985: 845). Concerning the style of newspaper headlines in English, which frequently contain block language, Swan (2002) stresses that "in this style there are some special rules of grammar, and words are often used in unusual ways."

Other problems or rather challenges caused by block language (in newspaper headlines) include the following. "Some forms of block language have recognizable clause structures. Those forms deviate from regular clause structures in omitting closed-class items of low information value, such as the finite forms of the verb BE and the articles ..." (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik, 1985: 845). It should also be noted that "... Headlines can often, in their attempt to attract a reader to a story, be ambiguous or confusing" (Reah, 2002: 13). Further, Hicks (2003: 66-67) concludes that "the search for a short word to use in a headline has created a specialized subs' (subeditors') vocabulary that, on some papers, turns every investigation into a 'probe', every attempt into a 'bid' and every agreement into a 'row'".

In block language of newspaper headlines, grammatical issues or points might cover the following eight features (Swan, 2002). First, "headlines are not always complete sentences. Many headlines consist of noun phrases with no verb" (Swan, 2002), for example, "MORE WAGE CUTS" and "HOLIDAY HOTEL DEATH". Second, very often nouns are used to function as pre-modifiers or adjectives, and as a result, learners of English would find such constructions difficult to digest. "Headlines often contain strings of three, four or more nouns; nouns earlier in the string modify those that follow", as in "FURNITURE FACTORY PAY CUT ROW" (Swan: 2002). Third, it is observable that "headlines often leave out articles and the verb be", as in "SHAKESPEARE PLAY IMMORAL, SAYS HEADMASTER" and "WOMAN WALKS ON MOON" (Swan, 2002). Fourth, note that "in headlines, simple tenses are often used instead of progressive or perfect forms. The simple present is used for both present and past events" (Swan, 2002 and Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik, 1985). The current writer finds such a use of the present tense striking and eye-catching. The present tense makes the headlines read more dramatically. Examples are "BLIND GIRL CLIMBS EVEREST (= ... has climbed ...)" and "STUDENTS FIGHT FOR COURSE CHANGES (= ... are fighting ...)", as given by Swan (2002). It is also common omit the verb *be* (for example, *is* and *are*) in the present continuous/progressive tense when talking about changes, as

in "BRITAIN GETTING WARMER, SAY SCIENTISTS" and "TRADE FIGURES IMPROVING" (Swan, 2002). Fifth, some words, particularly nouns and verbs, are frequently used interchangeably; in one context, a certain word acts as a noun and in another context, the same word functions a verb. In other words, nouns are converted into verbs and verbs into nouns. "Many headline words", Swan (2002) points out, "are used as both nouns and verbs, and nouns are often used to modify other nouns. So it is not always easy to work out the structure of a sentence", as in the following "US CUTS AID TO THIRD WORLD (= The US reduces its help ... CUTS is a verb, AID is a noun.)" Sixth, it is also important to know that "headlines often use infinitives to refer to the future", as in "PM TO VISIT AUSTRALIA" and "HOSPITALS TO TAKE FEWER PATIENTS" (Swan, 2002). Based on the contexts above, *to visit* means *will visit* and *to take* refers to *will take*. Seventh, Swan (2002) says that "auxiliary verbs are usually dropped from passive structures, leaving past participles", as in "MURDER HUNT: MAN HELD (= ... a man is being held by police.)" and "SIX KILLED IN EXPLOSION (= Six people have been killed ...)". Eighth or finally, it is related to punctuation; "a colon (:) is often used to separate the subject of a headline from what is said about it", as in "STRIKES: PM TO ACT" and "MOTORWAY CRASH: DEATH TOLL RISES" (Swan, 2002).

Next, concerning the vocabulary items of block language used in newspaper headlines, there exist some crucial points for the current author to restate and present in the following. Based on Swan's (2002) work, the special features of the vocabulary items of block language are short, unusual, special and dramatic. "Short words save space, and so they are very common in newspaper headlines. Some of the short words in headlines are unusual in ordinary language (e.g. curb, meaning 'restrict' or 'restriction')", Swan (2002) says. It is also possible that some words "are used in special senses which they do not often have in ordinary language (e.g. bid, meaning 'attempt'). Other words are chosen not because they are short, but because they sound dramatic" (Swan, 2002). Other examples listed by Swan (2002) include: "1. act: take action; do something, as in FOOD CRISIS: GOVERNMENT TO ACT, 2. aid: military or financial help; to help, as in MORE AID FOR POOR COUNTRIES and UNIONS AID HOSPITAL STRIKERS, 3. alert: alarm, warning, as in FLOOD ALERT ON EAST COAST, and 4. allege: make an accusation, as in WOMAN ALLEGES UNFAIR TREATMENT". Note that the four vocabulary items above, namely *act*, *aid*, *alert* and *allege*, are short and save space when printed in headlines. Certainly, block language in a headline may be humorous and ambiguous – to some extent. Observe the following example (Richardson, 2007: 24-25): "Prostitutes Appeal to Pope: Here the double meaning of the headline is obvious and more likely to create humour rather than cause misunderstanding". As Richardson (2007: 24-25) says, "We are far more likely to conclude that the sub-editor intended *appeal* to mean 'to plead' or 'to request' rather than its alternative meaning 'to attract' or 'to tempt'".

Data and Findings

All data were retrieved from the three online newspapers, namely the Indonesian *The Jakarta Post* (JP), the American *The Washington Post* (WP) and the British *The Telegraph* (TT) on Sunday, 27 October 2013.

First, these are the 20 headlines published by *The Telegraph* (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>), next to the headlines are comments/findings (in brackets).

- 1) Minister's TV licence fee threat (four nouns: *TV licence fee threat*; headword: *threat*)
- 2) British women jailed in Brazil for drug smuggling (passive: *have been* [omitted])
- 3) Barack Obama to discuss Pakistan drone strikes with Nawaz Sharif (*to = will: to discuss = will discuss*)
- 4) Pakistani PM urges US to end drone strikes (present tense: *urges = has urged*)
- 5) Former Nazi officer sentenced to life over 1943 Kefalonia massacres (passive: *sentenced = has been sentenced*)

- 6) Miss World: bikinis banned from 2013 contest in Indonesia (passive: *banned = have been banned*)
- 7) Spanish Prime Minister brings Gibraltar dispute to UN (present tense: *brings = has brought*)
- 8) Spain's King Juan Carlos to have third hip operation (*to = will: to have = will have*)
- 9) Cameron vows to defend Gibraltar (present tense: *vows = has vowed*)
- 10) Spain's parliament vacated after roof leak (passive: *vacated = has been vacated*)
- 11) Spain tells Britain to remove Gibraltar reef (present tense: *tells = has told*)
- 12) Gibraltarians greet British warships as tensions rise (present tense: *greet = have greeted* and *rise = have risen*)
- 13) Sunken cargo ship survivors rescued (passive: *rescued = have been rescued*)
- 14) North Korea warns US of 'horrible disaster' (present tense: *warns = has warned*)
- 15) South Korea displays military might (present tense: *displays = has displayed*)
- 16) Koreas reopen Kaesong industrial zone (present tense: *reopen = have reopened*)
- 17) India cyclone leaves trail of destruction (present tense: *leaves = has left*)
- 18) Cyclone Phailin damage affects millions (present tense: *affects = has affected*)
- 19) India clears way to cancel helicopter deal (present tense: *clears = has cleared*)
- 20) More than 90 Hindu pilgrims killed in stampede to temple (passive: *killed = have been (got) killed*)

Most headlines above use the present tense, for example in (4), (9) and (16) to sound dramatic. The passive voice is also relatively frequent.

Second, these are the 20 headlines published by *The Jakarta Post* (<http://www.thejakartapost.com/>), next to the headlines are comments/findings (in brackets).

- 21) Jakarta launches city marathon (present tense: *launches = has launched*)
- 22) KPK gets spiritual help against dark forces (present tense: *gets = has gotten*)
- 23) SBY's final budget lacks punch (present tense: *lacks = has lacked*)
- 24) RI lags behind Laos, Vietnam on gender gap index (present tense: *lags = has lagged*)
- 25) New measure unveiled to help start-up companies (passive: *unveiled = has been unveiled*)
- 26) 2014 state budget realistic, good for stability: Economists (separation, statement [:])
- 27) Govt asked to restrict foreign investments (passive: *asked = has/have been asked*)
- 28) RI to become vaccine supply hub for Muslim world (*to = will: to become = will become*)
- 29) Thousands of Yogyakartans greet royal newlyweds (present tense: *greet = have greeted*)
- 30) EU, Indonesia urged to begin partnership agreement talks (passive: *urged = have been urged*)
- 31) BIN denies kidnapping PD ex chief (present tense: *denies = has denied*)
- 32) Soldiers, policemen clash; 3 injured (present tense: *clash = have clashed*)
- 33) SBY to end term on low note (*to = will*)
- 34) KPK locks up Andi for graft (present tense: *locks = has locked*)
- 35) Rupiah, stocks rally after US lawmakers end shutdown (present tense: *rally = have rallied* and *end = have ended*)
- 36) Residents challenge mayor over church permit (present tense: *challenge = have challenged*)
- 37) Garuda, Yamanashi to boost RI-Japan tourism (*to = will: to boost = will boost*)
- 38) Pilgrims assured of facilities (passive: *assured = have been assured*)
- 39) BI to sign swap deal with South Korea (*to = will: to sign = will sign*)
- 40) Australians, Indonesians observe Bali bombings (present tense: *observe = have observed*)

In the headlines of *The Jakarta Post*, the use of the present tense is also dominant; it is the most frequent.

Finally, these are the 9 headlines published by *The Washington Post* (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/>), next to the headlines are comments/findings (in brackets).

- 41) Six S. Koreans detained in N. Korea can return home (passive: *detained* = *had been detained*)
- 42) Brazilian police say protesters beat up officer, stole his service pistol (present tense: *say* = *have said*)
- 43) U.S. to lose access to projects in Afghanistan (*to* = *will*: *to lose* = *will lose*)
- 44) Shooting leaves one man dead in D.C. (present tense: *leaves* = *has left*)
- 45) Saturday morning shooting leaves 1 man dead, 1 injured (present tense: *leaves* = *has left*)
- 46) Howard University President Ribeau retires (present tense: *retires* = *has retired*)
- 47) Stocks climb for a third week (present tense: *climb* = *have climbed*)
- 48) Young workers souring on federal careers (*to be* 'are' omitted)
- 49) Sen. Warner requests study of shutdown impacts (present tense: *requests* = *has requested*)

As can be seen above, like in *The Washington Post* and *The Jakarta Post*, the most frequent pattern in the headlines in *The Telegraph* is the use of the present tense (six times: 42, 44, 45, 46, 47 and 49) in order to create dramatic atmospheres. The other three are respectively a passive (41), omitted 'be' (48) and 'to' meaning 'will' (43).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the functions of block language in headlines are to be concise (space saving), dramatic and attractive. The issues or challenges are ambiguity and unfamiliarity or complexity (unusual grammar and vocabulary items, for example, it may be hard for learners of English to identify what has been omitted in a headline). The use of the (simple) present tense turns out to be most productive in headlines examined in this study; the present tense sounds dramatic. "It is also obvious that linguistic or language aspects, for instance, the mastery of English grammar and the size of vocabulary (including bloc language namely language used in a newspaper in English), play a crucial role ..." (Bram, 2010). Thus, learners of English should familiarize ourselves with block language used in newspaper headlines in English. It is useful for them to practise analyzing grammar and vocabulary items of block language (in the Textual Structure course at university, for instance).

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